

# An investigation into the career thinking of foundation doctors in Wales

C4ME SUPPLEMENT

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

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## **Background**

The training pathway of UK doctors is apparently linear, as trainees typically progress through foundation and specialty training before applying for consultant or GP posts. (1) Despite this, the UK Foundation Programme's 2018 career destinations report stated that just 37.7% of Foundation Year 2 doctors (F2s) progressed directly to specialty training, (2) continuing the annual decline from 71.3% in 2011.

One commonly cited reason for these figures is the opportunity to work abroad. Surman et al. compared home-domiciled graduates' intentions to practice in the UK. Those intending on remaining decreased from 49.6% in 2011 to 25.8% in 2015. (3) Reasons for the increased desire to work abroad include favourable working environments, breaks from UK medicine and the UK's exit from the European Union. (4)

In 2017, a study funded by the Wales Deanery analysed medical trainers' confidence levels when providing careers support. (5) Responses led to a classification of trainees' career thinking states: decided, explorers and rethinkers. The decided had a clear choice, explorers were unsure of options and rethinkers were re-evaluating careers. Consideration of these categories could engender more tailored careers support. This classification was based on trainers' opinions. This study focused on understanding the career thinking of foundation trainees in Wales, testing the classifications, exploring possible associations between specialty intentions and thinking states and assessing trainees' confidence levels when making career decisions.

## Methods

Data were collected through an online survey (January 31st to March 29th 2019). The target population was all foundation trainees currently working in Wales (n=678).

The survey was created using Jisc online surveys with all questions optional and participation voluntary. A variety of distribution methods were used, including emailing the survey link to all post-graduate hubs across Wales for circulation to all foundation trainees. In order to further increase response rates, a paper copy of the survey was sent to four of the hubs for distribution during teaching.

Data were analysed descriptively and statistically using SPSS software. Free text comments were manually analysed thematically (by JM) in Microsoft Word, and a sample of the coding was verified with co-authors.

The study was deemed a service evaluation, not requiring ethical approval.

## Results

The survey was completed by fifty-eight foundation trainees; 56.9% were F1 and 63.8% were female. The small sample size means that results should be interpreted with caution. However, findings complement other studies, increasing confidence that results are not skewed.

### *Career thinking states*

Participants identified with the suggested thinking states of decided (45.5%), explorer (43.6%) and rethinker (10.9%).

### *Specialty intentions*

Only 30.2% of trainees intended on progressing directly to specialty training. The three most preferred specialty training programmes were general practice (20.8%), internal medicine training (17%) and acute care common stem (11.3%). There was a significant association between thinking state and specialty preference, with GP the most common preference among the decided (20.2%) and general medicine most common among explorers (27.3%) ( $X^2(12)=18.254$ ,  $p=0.041$ ). Results should be interpreted with caution due to the small proportion of rethinkers (n=6).

### *Usefulness of resources*

Discussions with consultants were considered the most useful resource, with a mean score of 4.31 on a five-point Likert scale. Websites were generally less utilised with 42.8% stating that they were not used.

### *Career planning and support*

Fifty-three percent stated that they had found the process of navigating careers to be unclear and confusing, with a significant association between these feelings and thinking state. The decided were more likely to find the process clear and straightforward ( $X^2(6)=21.820$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Trainees felt somewhat supported when making career decisions, with a mean of 3.09 on a five-point Likert scale. This indicated that overall, trainees did not feel strongly either way, demonstrating room for improvement.

## Discussion

This study supports findings from the wider literature that fewer trainees are directly progressing to specialty training.

No previous studies have analysed the career thinking states of trainees. These findings confirm that foundation trainees in Wales can be categorised by three thinking states. A significant association was found between specialty intention and thinking state, with GP the most preferred choice among the decided. This result is important given the recognised recruitment 'crisis' in this specialty, with the number of GP practitioners in Wales declining annually since 2010. (6) At the time of survey distribution, some specialty programmes had been remodeled following the Shape of Training report, (7) bringing changes to content and duration. This study did not explore the impact of these changes on career thinking state or specialty choice. Further study would be required to fully assess the impact of programme changes on career thinking.

Encouragingly, the resources deemed most useful were discussions with experienced individuals. However, results from the Wales Deanery study (5) suggest that this may not be sufficient in advising explorers and rethinkers. Trainers felt less confident with topics such as working abroad (22%) and flexible training options (37%); areas commonly requiring support from these trainees. Careers support should therefore be tailored to suit varying needs, as well as increasing awareness of other resources.

Over half of respondents found the process of navigating careers to be unclear and confusing, with a significant association ( $p < 0.001$ ) between these feelings and thinking state. This is supported by Lachish et al. who suggest that trainees find it difficult to access career guidance. (8) With this in mind, career resources may need adapting to ease navigation.

## Lessons Learnt

### Description

I conducted a quantitative study, investigating the career thinking of foundation trainees in Wales.

### Feelings

I was proud of the work completed and feel that the results will help inform changes to careers support.

### Evaluation

I recognise the risk of non-response bias due to the low response rate. My results, however, complement similar studies. Additional findings, not yet considered in literature, means this study adds to the evidence base and suggestions for the development of careers advice are indicated.

### Analysis

The low response rates were associated with difficulties in distribution. I did not have access to a single survey distribution point for foundation trainees, meaning I had to be creative in my recruitment strategy.

### Conclusion

I thoroughly enjoyed undertaking this rewarding project, developing generic skills which will be useful throughout my career.

### Action Plan

In future I will seek to consider potential challenges prior to the project start and develop back-up plans. I will also be more realistic in my expectation of response rates.

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